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ABSTRACT

Personal relationships can provide comfort and pleasure or strain and disappointment. Relationships which provide the greatest opportunities for support and companionship may also be the ones most open to negative exchanges. Theoretical perspectives can help predict how positive and negative interpersonal experiences can together affect well-being. Positive and negative interpersonal experiences may have equivalent but opposite effects. Positive and negative exchanges are probably not equal because few friendships would survive if they did not involve more positive than negative experiences. Some research has shown that negative social encounters have a disproportionate impact on well-being, outweighing positive supportive encounters. People are quite sensitive to negative experiences. The reasons for this sensitivity may involve the relative frequency of positive versus negative interpersonal events, the view that negative actions present no attributional ambiguity but invite inferences of malice, and an adaptive response to be vigilant about threats to one's person. Scaling of positive and negative exchanges would be useful in social interaction research. (ABL)

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Nonsupportive Aspects of Social Relationships

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Two themes characterize how philosophers, poets, social scientists and others have thought about social relationships over the centuries. The Roman statesman Cicero commented the "Friendship makes prosperity more brilliant and lightens adversity by dividing and sharing it." A 17th century Spanish writer, Baltasar Gracian, echoed this sentiment: "Friendship multiplies the good of life and divides the evil. Tis the sole remedy against misfortune, the very ventilation of the soul." Ralph Waldo Emerson went so far as to argue that "A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature." Yet less glowing views of close relationships have also been expressed throughout history. Bertrand Russell sardonically suggested, "If we were all given by magic the power to read each other's thoughts, I suppose the first effect would be to dissolve all friendships." Arnold Lobel commented in a similar vein, "Advice from friends is like the weather: some of it is good; some of it is bad." Recognizing the potential for conflict between friends, Voltaire suggested that "Friendship is the marriage of the soul, and this marriage is liable to divorce."

These two sets of quotes, as well as our own intuitions and experiences, indicate that personal relationships can at times provide comfort and pleasure and can at other times cause strain and disappointment. Indeed, research on the developmental course of close relationships suggests that the balance of positive to negative exchanges shifts over time, such that negative exchanges become increasingly common (Rands & Levinger, 1979). Thus, relationships that initially provide the greatest opportunities for support and companionship may in fact be most vulnerable to the development of aversive exchange patterns (Altman & Taylor, 1973). It is this apparent paradox that I would like to address today. Specifically, I would like to consider what theoretical

perspectives we can draw upon to help us anticipate how these positive and negative interpersonal experiences will jointly affect well-being. Three different kinds of predicitions could be made in this regard.

The simplest prediction is that positive and negative interpersonal experiences would have equivalent but opposite effects. For example, a reassuring comment from another person would elevate one's morale about as much as a disparaging comment would lower morale. Assuming that positive and negative social exchanges are equally common, such symmetrical effects would tend to cancel each other, with no net impact on psychological well-being.

For most people, however, positive and negative social exchanges are probably not equally common -- rather, positive social encounters undoubtedly outnumber negative ones. Few friendships would survive for very long if they did not afford more positive than negative experiences (Homans, 1974; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Given the greater prevalence of positive social exchanges, we might expect them to overshadow negative exchanges in significance. That is, against a backdrop of generally positive experiences, people might tend to ignore or perhaps to forgive occasional misdeeds by their friends. If this were so, then such misdeeds would be expected to have relatively weak effects on the person's psychological well-being, while friends' positive actions would be expected to have strong, beneficial effects on well-being.

Ironically, it is the very existence of a backdrop of largely positive social encounters which makes possible a third prediction -- that negative social encounters would have disproportionate impact on well-being precisely because they are rarer and therefore more salient. Unfortunately, I believe that the current empirical evidence tends to favor this pessimistic prediction, and I would like to describe this evidence briefly before suggesting several

theoretical reasons why it makes sense that negative social exchanges would have quite potent effects on well-being.

Evidence of disproportionate impact of negative experiences. The kind of studies that allow us to evaluate these three different predictions would need to assess both negative and positive exchanges and to contrast their respective associations with psychological well-being. Only a handful of published studies provide such data, but they tend to support the third prediction. For example, in a study of 120 elderly widowed women, Rook (1984) found that negative social exchanges, such as criticism and invasion of privacy, were strongly and inversely related to the women's morale, while positive exchanges, such as emotional support and shared leisure activity, were only weakly related to well-being. Fiore, Becker and Coppel (1983) asked people who were caring for someone with Alzheimer's disease to rate how helpful or upsetting members of their social networks were on a number of dimensions. The researchers found no association between ratings of helpfulness and a measure of depression, but a strong association between ratings of upsettingness and depression. In a study of pregnant adolescents, Barrera (1981) similarly found that the number of people who were sources of both difficulties and support was related to the adolescent's symptoms of psychological distress, while the number of people who were sources of support only had no effect on the level of distress. Studies by Henderson and his colleagues in Australia (Henderson, Byrne & Duncan-Jones, 1981) and by Shinn and her colleagues at New York University (Shinn, Lehmann & Wong, 1985) have found similar asymmetries in the impact of positive and negative social interactions.

It is not unusual or surprising that unpleasant encounters with others lower psychological well-being; what is surprising across these different studies is that the effects of unpleasant or unsupportive encounters

consistently outweigh the effects of pleasant, supportive encounters. The samples and measurement procedures in these different studies were quite diverse, suggesting that the findings are not idiosyncratic to a particular population or measurement strategy.

Moreover, researchers in several other areas have identified comparable "negativity biases" (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972). Person perception studies, for example, indicate that negative information about others is more heavily weighted than positive information (Hamilton & Zanna, 1972; Hodges, 1974; Richey, McClelland, & Shimkunas). Studies of political behavior suggest that voting is more often driven by a desire to vote against a disliked candidate than to vote for a preferred candidate (Kernell, 1977). Experimental studies of gambling similarly suggest that risk taking is more strongly influenced by anticipated losses than by anticipated gains (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972). Negative life events have consistently been found to increase psychiatric symptoms, while positive events have rarely been found to reduce symptoms (Thoits, 1983). Finally, research with married couples suggests that the level of negative behaviors by the spouse is a better predictor of marital satisfaction than the level of positive behaviors (Weiss, Hops & Patterson, 1973).

These findings thus converge with those described earlier. Considered together, they suggest that people may generally be predisposed to be quite sensitive to negative information and experiences. This sensitivity appears to apply to social interaction as well.

Theoretical reasons for negativity bias. But why should negative experiences with others be so potent? Similarly, why do positive experiences so often appear to have weak effects? Although puzzling at first glance, there are several theoretical reasons to expect such asymmetries.

The first explanation has to do with the relative frequency of positive versus negative interpersonal events. Positive events are undoubtedly more frequent for most people. As such, they form a backdrop against which the more rare negative events are experientially salient. Indeed, given the much higher base rate of positive events, we may come to take them for granted. In a sense, we tend to assimilate such pleasant experiences to a mere "baseline" level of expectation (cf., Berscheid, 1983; Parducci, 1968). If most of our dealings with friends are positive, we are particularly taken aback by negative exchanges. We may ruminate about such events for a long time, searching for their cause and trying to reconcile them with our previous beliefs about our friends.

The second explanation assumes differences in the kind of cognitive processing that is prompted by positive versus negative interpersonal experiences. Attribution theorists argue that we can infer others' motives with confidence only when their behavior is counter-normative (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). However, most prosocial behaviors, such as offering assistance to someone in need, conform to prevailing cultural norms. Thus, it is difficult to know whether such thoughtful gestures reflect genuine caring or mere feelings of obligation to help others in need. If we derive the greatest pleasure from others' actions when we know that they are inspired by liking or caring for us, then the attributional ambiguity that surrounds prosocial behaviors is apt to dilute our pleasure. Negative actions by others, in contrast, present no attributional ambiguity. It is counter-normative to withhold help from friends, to insult or exploit them, or otherwise let them down. Such behaviors thus invite our confident inference that they reflect malice or at least insufficient caring. The fact that we are quick to infer malicious intentions for others' negative actions but are less quick to infer good intentions for their positive actions may further explain why negative

actions are so painful.

A final reason why positive and negative interpersonal experiences may have asymmetrical effects has to do with their adaptive significance. In trying to interpret negativity biases that have appeared in other research areas, Kanouse and Hanson (1972) argued that humans may have an innate tendency to be more vigilant to potential threats or risks than to potential pleasures or benefits. Such vigilance to threats makes us quite reactive to them. This basic predisposition may have aided survival at a point in our evolution when the environment posed many tangible threats. Our ancestors may have found it more valuable to know where the saber toothed tiger lived than to know where to find blackberries. Kanouse and Hanson (1972) also pointed out that many kinds of negative experiences have greater power to spoil or cancel the pleasure of positive experiences than vice versa. For example, a single heated exchange at an otherwise tranquil wedding may ruin the experience; a single pleasant exchange in the midst of a wedding marred with strife has little power to restore tranquility. Because of such differences in adaptive significance, it may be functional for people to be more sensitive to aversive interpersonal experiences than to enjoyable interpersonal experiences, even though this orientation has costs for their emotional health.

To summarize, there are several theoretical bases for predicting that negative interpersonal experiences have greater psychological impact than positive experiences, and emerging empirical evidence is consistent with this prediction. However, it is also important to interpret this empirical work with caution. Previous studies have not established the direction of causality. Although I have implied that that negative exchanges with others cause emotional distress, it is also plausible that distressed people are particularly likely to elicit or react intensely to such exchanges. In

addition, a fair test of the relative impact of positive versus negative exchanges requires that exchanges that are roughly comparable in intensity or extremity be compared. To it is obviously not legitimate to conclude that a negativity bias exists when extreme negative events, such as being ridiculed in public by one's best friend, are contrasted with mild positive events, such as being offered a ride to the dentist by a casual friend. More legitimate would be a comparison of the effects of a mild compliment with the effects of an equally mild criticism. Such scaling considerations have figured prominently in investigations of negativity biases in other areas (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972) and should receive greater attention in studies of social interaction.

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